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The sound of a train horn blaring from a nearby crossing elicited a chuckle from the group that gathered Monday afternoon at the Arlington Heights Village Hall.

They laughed because the intrusion illustrated what many Chicago-area residents and elected officials consider an annoyance that occurs several times a day.

Representatives from municipalities in the north and northwest suburbs assembled in Arlington Heights to meet with Federal Railroad Administrator Allan Rutter. He outlined how federal laws governing train whistles have been modified to accommodate towns in the Chicago area.

Rutter acknowledged the challenges of balancing the needs of the Chicago area with those of the rest of the country.

"We've added much greater flexibility to implementing quiet zones," Rutter said. "This affects Illinois because of the large amount of traffic here."

Rutter noted that many high-risk crossings exist in the Chicago area, thanks to a large concentration of motor vehicles and trains traveling at high speeds. Factors that enter into assessing risk include accident history, as well anticipated collisions. Injuries and fatalities also figure in.

But the new rules put the onus on local municipalities to take measures to qualify as exceptions to a rule that requires train engineers to sound horns at most crossings that intersect with public highways in high-traffic areas.

Some of those requirements, such as installing new crossing gates or barricades, are costly to towns with limited budgets.

"What you are giving here is a rather expensive, unfunded mandate," said Northbrook Village President Mark Damisch said. "Just give us the money. Make this a funded mandate." He suggested that Congress grant a supplemental appropriation to pay for improvements that would make sounding horns at grade crossings unnecessary.

Rutter noted he has no jurisdiction over authorizing funds. "Nobody came to me with a bucket of money," he said.

Depending on the circumstances, improvements may not be necessary at every crossing along a rail corridor for it to remain a quiet zone, Rutter said.

Several other officials raised the issue of liability, asking not only who would be liable if an accident were to occur, but also who is responsible for funding.

Much of the feedback from meetings such as Monday's session indicates the Federal Railroad Administration needs to work on refining the language in its requirements, Rutter said.

"People want us to be clear," he said. It might be necessary to clarify language in the federal law about who pays to install and maintain safety improvements, he explained.

Rutter also touched on the value of educating motorists and pedestrians about the risks of crossing railroad intersections when they shouldn't, as well as enforcing laws when they are violated. He noted that video surveillance and enforcement at railroad crossings have been effective in some cases.

He also pointed out early in his discussion that a train whistle ban in Florida led to an increased number of accidents at railroad crossings.

But the first step communities need to take is to inform the Federal Railroad Administration they want to keep existing quiet zones, Rutter said. Those without quiet zones may also inform the

Railroad Administration they want one.

Regardless of the route they choose to take, communities have up to eight years to comply with the federal law.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, helped to bring Rutter to Arlington Heights to talk about the train whistle issue. "We are here to balance safety with environmental protection," Kirk said.

A concerted effort to make federal laws more palatable locally has already been effective, Kirk said.

"The prior involvement of the communities dramatically modified the original draft," he said. "The original draft imposed hundreds of train horns."

But he also noted that more can be done to preserve a way of life in along the North Shore and in the northwest suburbs.

"I'd like to 'grandfather in' quiet zones where we've never had an accident," Kirk said. He noted that dozens of such crossings exist in the 10th District.

The 1994 Railroad Safety Reauthorization Act requires railroads to sound horns at public highway crossings. It also provides exceptions at low-risk intersections or at crossings where safety measures reduce risk of an accident. A 1996 amendment requires the Railroad Administration to consider the interests of communities with existing train whistle bans.

Based on feedback from municipalities in the Chicago area, the law has been modified to give towns more latitude to comply with the law and also maintain quiet zones or areas where sounding a train whistle would not be mandatory.

"Cookie-cutter solutions don't work in the Chicago area," Mayor Arlene Mulder said when she introduced Rutter at Monday's meeting.

Attending the meeting were municipal officials from Arlington Heights, Bartlett, Buffalo Grove, Deerfield, Des Plaines, Glenview, Highland Park, Highwood, Hoffman Estates, Lake Forest, Mount Prospect, Mundelein, Palatine, Northbrook, Wheeling and Wilmette.

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